

## Foreword to the Coast Salish Curriculum

**The goal of the Coast Salish Curriculum is to introduce to students and teachers the Duwamish People,** who lived for thousands of years in villages along the Duwamish, Black, and Cedar Rivers and around Lake Washington, east of Puget Sound, and south of Lake Sammamish. The biggest villages of the Duwamish people were located in the area now called Renton. Because the number of artifacts and amount of research directly related to the Duwamish tribe is limited, for practical reasons the curriculum presents the **Coast Salish Native Americans of Central Puget Sound**, consisting of different tribes that include the **Duwamish**.

In this curriculum the terms Native Americans, First Nations, and Native People are used interchangeably. In the current literature in general it is not considered appropriate to use the term "Indians," first used by explorer Christopher Columbus, who mistakenly thought he had reached India.<sup>1</sup>

There are two basic misconceptions about Native Americans living on the Pacific Northwest Coast before arrival of people of European descent. The first is the belief that all Native Americans looked and lived in the same way, created the same art, and shared the same traditions and beliefs. The second misconception is that they represented a primitive civilization compared to other sophisticated cultures, for example, in Europe or Asia.

In fact, the Native Americans who lived in the Pacific Northwest thousands of years ago belonged, and still belong, to various different tribes. Their lives were shaped by the natural conditions in which they lived. The environment dictated not only what they ate, what houses they lived in, how they dressed, but also what their traditions and beliefs were.

The Native People who lived in the south of British Columbia, in Washington, and Oregon and shared a common basic language system are called "Coast Salish."

**The Coast Salish people are unique among the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest.** On the other hand, the lives of Pacific Northwest Native Americans from north of British Columbia in many ways was very different from those of the Coast Salish people. The traditions of the far northern Native Americans are more commonly described in literature which is easily available, but one should not extend general knowledge about the Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations onto the Coast Salish. This curriculum includes resources that are specific to the Coast Salish and Duwamish Native Peoples.

One of the goals of this curriculum is to break stereotypes and increase the unique knowledge of the Coast Salish First Nations. For example, the Coast Salish did not carve the totem poles so commonly associated with Pacific Northwest First Nations. Instead, Coast Salish artists carved "house poles," large carved planks of cedar which

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Stewart, *Stone, Bone, Antler & Shell: Artifacts of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 1.

were attached to the outside and/or inside of longhouses. Totem poles represented the history of the clan, while house poles were a personal expression of their carvers and usually didn't represent a narrative story of a family lineage and histories.

One of the reasons for the lack of recognition of Coast Salish art and culture is that, as one art historian explains it, "Northern Northwest Coast art ... has been known...to the art-viewing public since around 1940. But to the south, Coast Salish art in general and this style in particular did not gain recognition until about 1980."<sup>2</sup> Late appreciation for the Coast Salish was caused by historical and cultural factors, including the relative scarcity of Coast Salish material objects and the belief that the far northern peoples were superior.

To address the other misconception that Coast Salish represented a primitive civilization compared to other sophisticated cultures you should remember that Coast Salish Native People developed a very complex technology based on availability of natural resources in the area. They did not have metal tools but instead developed a high level of tool-making by using stone, bone, antler and shell tools, weapons and other objects to fish, hunt, fight, gather, build longhouses, carve canoes, make clothing, and other objects for everyday and ceremonial uses.

The natural environment—our mild climate, abundance of rivers and open waters, and great quantity of forests—shaped the lives of the Coast Salish Native People in Central Puget Sound. Their culture, traditions, and beliefs were strongly connected to the natural world. Everything that the Coast Salish Native People achieved over thousands of years could be compared to the latest trends in current developed societies. An environmentally sound way of living, sustainability, and self-sufficiency had been already discovered by First Nations and forgotten by many other cultures.

There is an expectation on the part of the Curriculum authors that students should remember two words after fulfilling the requirements of CBAs. Those words are **salmon** and **cedar**. The well-being of the Coast Salish depended on the availability of those two natural resources. Salmon was by far the most important source of food and formed the basis of the Coast Salish diet.<sup>3</sup> Cedar trees provided the basis for everything else, including housing, transportation, clothing, and objects of everyday use. Salmon and cedar were and are present in many Coast Salish ceremonies, traditions, beliefs, legends, and myths. While more widespread trade and the arrival of white settlers changed the way of life, it did not change traditions and beliefs.

The Coast Salish Native Americans and the Duwamish People still live among us and are working hard to keep their culture alive. The Renton History Museum is devoted to teaching about their history so that we can all better appreciate the richness of our shared heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brotherton, ed., *S'abadeb The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ashwell, Reg & Hancock, David, *Coast Salish: Their Art and Culture* (Hancock House Publishers Ltd., 2006), 28.